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SUBJECT: JEWISH PILGRIMAGE TO DJERBA: A TUNISIAN SUCCESS
STORY

REF: TUNIS 669

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for Reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary: Approximately 3,500 Jewish pilgrims, including reportedly 500 Israeli citizens, descended on the Tunisian island of Djerba for the annual pilgrimage to El Ghriba synagogue on May 15-16, coinciding with the Jewish holiday Lag B'Omer. The pilgrimage took place with no reported problems, and was a positive example of GOT policies of religious tolerance and Tunisia's acceptance of its dwindling, ancient Jewish community. On May 15 Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, visited the La Ghriba synagogue to witness the pilgrimage. End Summary.

Background on the Pilgrimage

12. (U) The El Ghriba synagogue is said to have been built 1,900 years ago using a stone from Solomon's temple. While the present synagogue is believed to be approximately one hundred years old, some of its Torahs and parchments reportedly date back to the original construction of the synagogue. The fame of the El Ghriba synagogue is based on numerous traditions and beliefs that emphasize its antiquity and importance among the local Jews as well as those of the former Jewish communities of Tunisia and Libya. The synagogue annually becomes the site of a two-day celebration, culminating in a procession to the synagogue by a throng of pilgrims wheeling a large pyramidal lamp (the menorah) covered in fabric through the streets, while praising venerated rabbis from Jewish history. Within the synagogue a shrine is filled with eggs inscribed with the names of young women, a rite said to guarantee fertility. (NOTE: The pilgrimage and ceremony at El Ghriba is uniquely Tunisian and is different from more common forms of celebration of Lag B'Omer. One Tunisian Jewish community leader said he would not likely attend the ceremony, describing it as "pagan." END NOTE.)

Security

13. (U) Since the 2002 bombing on El Ghriba synagogue, the first attack attributed to al Qaeda after September 11, the GOT has significantly increased security around the synagogue. For the pilgrimage, security measures included helicopter patrols, K-9 explosive detection units, and barricades on all streets within a half-mile around the synagogue. Numerous Djerbans said that 3,000 extra police

were on the island for the pilgrimage. The Tunisian Soccer Championship Cup, normally held on a Sunday, was rescheduled for Friday, May 12, reportedly so that security resources used for the soccer match could be shifted to Djerba for the pilgrimage. According to multiple Djerba residents, only foreigners and members of the Tunisian Jewish community were granted access to the site of the pilgrimage.

Celebration at La Ghriba

¶4. (U) The procession of the menorah took place on May 15, and was attended by Minister of Tourism Tijani Haddad and Kamel Ben Ali, Governor of the Medenine province, which includes Djerba. On that day the synagogue and the surrounding community center were packed with pilgrims of all ages and diverse nationalities. While some participated in rites inside the synagogue, many others relaxed in a makeshift market area, where food and entertainment were available. The atmosphere was celebratory and jovial, with impromptu dancing and singing. Many pilgrims approached the Ambassador to thank him for his presence, and to discuss the pilgrimage. Several Tunisian-American pilgrims described their small Tunisian Jewish communities in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. An Israeli pilgrim and tour guide, who said she had previously visited Tunisia with the delegation of then-Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom during the UN World Summit on the Information Society in November 2005, said she had led a delegation of "six busloads" of Israeli pilgrims. Many pilgrims noted the peaceful atmosphere of the pilgrimage, and praised the fact that they were welcomed in Tunisia.

RCD Rally Atmosphere in the Synagogue

¶5. (U) At the culmination of the procession, the Grand Rabbi of Djerba, Minister Haddad, Governor Ben Ali, and two visiting French parliamentarians gave speeches in the jam-packed synagogue. Despite the religious location and the presence of hundreds of pilgrims, the event seemed less about the significance of the pilgrimage or holiday, but rather felt like a ruling-party RCD rally. Speakers extolled the virtues of Tunisia's climate of religious tolerance, as led by Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Fervent chants of "Long Live Ben Ali!" interrupted speeches every few minutes. Local Jewish leaders were among the most active in leading cheers of support for the Tunisian President. (NOTE: The Jewish community has traditionally strongly praised the GOT for its support. END NOTE.) Haddad, delivering a message from Ben Ali said: "Tunisia will remain, as it has for millennia, a country of tolerance, brotherhood and concord, in which the three revealed religions coexist in security and tranquillity."

The Local Take

¶6. (C) In conversations with Djerbans, Poloff noted no animosity towards the Jewish pilgrimage, nor the local Jewish population. On the contrary, time and time again, non-Jewish Djerbans boasted of the tolerance and good relations with their local community, and the welcome they offered to the pilgrims, who had been coming "for hundreds of years". Several Tunisians pointed out that Jews were in Tunisia, "even before the arrival of Islam." Others noted the positive impact of 3,500 pilgrims on Djerba's tourism-based economy. One nineteen-year old Djerba resident said her only regret was that non-Jewish Djerbans couldn't access the site, "to attend the party" where there would be food and music.

¶7. (U) Some interlocutors demonstrated sensitivity when talking about the Israeli pilgrims who had attended. (NOTE: Numbers of Israeli pilgrims has increased in recent years and the GOT abolished travel restrictions on Israeli citizens in ¶2005. END NOTE) Several times, when listing pilgrims' nationalities, Djerbans would loudly state: "French, Belgian,

Italian, of course Tunisian" -- and then lowering their voice, assumedly not to draw attention to a sensitive topic -- "and Israelis." While articles in mainstream Tunisian newspapers highlighted the tolerance demonstrated by the pilgrimage, opposition paper al Mawqif warned that the pilgrimage showed further progress toward normalization with Israel, a process it and its supporting party oppose. One prominent editorialist compared Tunisia's welcome of Jewish pilgrims to the racist anti-Semitic/anti-Israel demonstrations by students at Manouba University in March (reftel), condemning the "racist discourse" of anti-Semitism and noting that since the decline of the Jewish community in Tunisia, young Tunisians knew Jews, "only through the prism of Israel and the historic injustice suffered by Palestinians for nearly sixty years."

18. (C) COMMENT: The Jewish pilgrimage to El Ghriba is a clear example of Tunisia's oft-trumpeted religious tolerance. The pilgrimage also plainly showed the tacit contract between the Jewish community and the GOT, which in turn for support, security and tolerant policies on religion receives the firm allegiance of the community. The GOT also focuses on the economic benefits of the pilgrimage, as shown by the presence of the Minister of Tourism rather than the Minister of Religious Affairs. In conversations with the MFA, our interlocutors often point to the Djerba pilgrimage as a step on the path to normalization with Israel. However, it is also possible that the GOT views the pilgrimage as a step in lieu of normalization. END COMMENT.
HUDSON